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Piecin' & Quiltin':Two Quilters in SW Arkansas

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PIECIN' AND QUILTIN': TWO QUILTERS IN SOUTHWEST ARKANSAS[1]

by

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Rushie and Stella live within twenty-five miles of each other on the same state highway in Southwest Arkansas. Rushie, 75, lives in a small town (with a population between fifty and one hundred, it really is more like "a widenin' in the road"), while Stella, 70, lives in a more isolated, rural location, in a small house just off the main highway. Both women quilt, and have done so for over fifty years, producing hundreds of quilts during this time; Stella's husband estimated that she has produced well over five hundred quilts. Both women often employ similar patchwork patterns (such as the Double Wedding Ring, Grandmother's Flower Garden, and the Lone or Broken Star), both use a frame to quilt the pieced work, and both have been forced to modify the use of materials commonly used in the past such as cotton fabric and batting because of increasing unavailability. Yet here the resemblance between the two women, living so close to each other and yet unaware of each other's existence, becomes more tenuous. What follows is an attempt to examine the differences as well as the similarities between them, and to illustrate the hazards and inaccuracies of assuming that the objects that people create, and the ways in which they create them, are static and culturally-bound to a norm conceived of by the researcher. Hopefully, from this study an analysis will emerge that may more accurately characterize a "folk art" and "folk artists" of this kind.

Rushie was born in Arkansas, her father is from North Carolina, and her mother's family was from Mississippi and can be traced back at least as far as slavery days. She grew up with a "big bunch" of brothers and sisters, as well as with her mother's "afflicted sister" and her grandmother. Her father was a railroad worker, but was often out of work, especially during the depression times. She attended school through

[1]My sincere thanks to Sam Hernandez, for both his illustrations and his encouragement.

the eighth grade, but never had any kind of sewing or home economics classes; she attributes her wide-ranging sewing abilities to "workin' at it, and doin' a lot of it."

Rushie began her first quilt at age ten, although she had to beg her mother to let her try, for she "was afraid to risk me with cuttin' myself up." These first quilts were supervised and the pattern designs picked out by Rushie's mother, but no formal teaching was ever attempted: "We [she and her sister] just put our quilts up and went to tryin', you know." She had thirteen quilts finished before her marriage to Luther ("I won't never forget the number"), and continued making them throughout her early married life for her children and relatives; she also met with "a bunch of ladies from all over the whole community" to furnish quilts for those unfortunate neighbors whose houses would burn down or be blown away, or whose furnishings would be destroyed by some other disaster. At times like these the women would go to the "church house" at the edge of town to quilt, since there they would be able to set up four or five quilts at once, often quilting fifteen to twenty quilts for one family in trouble. They have also used their quilts to buy some big items for the community: once they all bought a bus to use to go to church on Sundays, for the people "up and down the highway didn't have a way to go, so they did that quiltin'."

Sometimes there would be a period when there would be little quilting done; after one such period it was suggested by another woman in the town that they start up again, mainly as a pastime ("there's nothin' else to do.") So Rushie took out her bags of scraps—nearly two hundred pounds worth, accumulated from the remnants of clothing that she had sewn for people (for pay)—and began piecing them, "and I got to checkin' around and I had twenty-seven tops pieced!"

The first quilts that she sold, for five dollars each, came out of this bunch. "To get 'em out of my way, really, I'd a rather given 'em away than to have kept 'em, because I had to keep 'em aired, you know, about twice a year, taken care of.... And my grandkids, I can't give my children no quilts. They say they have all they can take care of." It was this act of selling the quilts to a neighbor woman (who needed them to keep her children warm, but who didn't quilt herself and whose mother was dead), that stimulated the idea of trying to find a market for the quilts. It appears that this attempt was motivated only partly for economic reasons: with all of the quilts piling up, not only was there a lack of space to store them, but there was also no practical need for the creation of any more of them. The need to create was still strong, however; selling the quilts was a perfect answer to the fulfillment of these needs.

The quilts were first purchased by the nephew of one of Rushie's friends; living in Little Rock, he supplied them to a shop in the city and a half a dozen or so of the women in Rushie's town got together at the church house to keep him supplied. They would bring their lunch and something to drink, and work all day. Rushie also wrote to a friend of hers, who had moved to Arizona, for help in finding a market for the quilts. She was sent an *Antique Trader*, a publication which lists antique shops all over the country, and provides a forum for buyers and sellers to reach each other. It was through this medium that Rushie contacted a woman in Northeast Texas, who has continued to buy the quilts, since her first purchase of $1000 worth. Rushie also wrote to the Smithsonian Institute and was directed to a woman with a crafts shop in New York City, who now handles some of Rushie's quilts. In addition, some of the quilts have been sold through the efforts of a man affiliated with an art center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, through Rushie's cousin in Long Beach, California, and through a woman with a gift shop in Hopewill, New Jersey. This latter contact was achieved through a woman who has a cabin at the lake near town (national forest area), whose daughter lives there.

Selling the quilts has become so important to the women who have been meeting to furnish them, that if for any reason one of the women is unable to make it to the church, she will hire another woman to do her work. Rushie will pay another woman twenty dollars to cut out and piece a top for her when Rushie furnishes the materials for it (fifteen dollars if the material is already cut out and ready to sew), and then another twenty-five dollars to have it quilted. She then sells the quilt for forty to ninety dollars, averaging seventy-five or eighty dollars for a queen size quilt. The velour quilts are never sold for less than seventy-five dollars.

Rushie and her husband are supported by his disability and social security payments, so she is grateful for the economic help afforded by the sale of the quilts. "It is right smart help to the people of low income, and . . . grandmothers and great-grandmothers that's doin' this quiltin', . . . people like we are can't get jobs in factories, or anything like that."[2] Nevertheless, she stresses that it is really the enjoyment of

[2]Although there is one young woman who quilts with them, Rushie finds this unusual, for most of the young women are busy working and haven't the time nor the energy to learn or practice quilting.

the process itself, the social situation involved and the need for something to do that lead the women to quilt. "We do a lot of it for pastime, instead of just sittin' and holdin' our hands, and [laughs] it keeps us out of meanness."

Although Rushie uses many "old-timey" quilt patterns (such as Blazing Star, Ohio Rose, Dresden Plate, Log Cabin, Little House, Wild Rose, Dutch Doll and Sunbonnet Sue) that she learned from her mother, the Sunday school teacher who lived across the street, and from other older woman quilters in the area, she also occasionally produces her own patterns.[3] These patterns, primarily for appliqué designs, are compositions that she assembles by cutting out newspaper or magazine drawings that resemble her ideas, or by tracing patterns that she likes. "I follow the original pattern, but I just put everything together. I just figure out where they'll go." If the drawings need to be changed in size, she has her grand-daughter draw them according to her directions. Rushie then makes a stencil from the drawings that is later used as a template for cutting out the material.

For both pieced and appliquéd quilts, she usually has cut out all her pieces at once, and she threads them on a string, so that when she is ready to sew, everything is already prepared. She is conscious of the general tone she wants each quilt to have, and plans and chooses the colors for the individual patches with that concept in mind. She arranges the fabric colors next to each other in a progressive sequence to achieve a general blending in reference to the key colors already established, being careful to repeat fabric sequences and colors in the overall design. "That's the way you can make it just nearly a perfect quilt."

Although the primary material used earlier for the piece work was cotton, its recent scarcity has caused Rushie to begin using wash and wear, doubleknit, and nylon velour fabrics. She has used the velour for only four or five years, since the establishment of a garment factory in Nashville, Arkansas, which sells it at low prices through outlet stores. She is very pleased with the velour, and feels that although the cotton is currently more in demand, "when the people learns what the velour is, why, they like it real well." She likes it especially for the appliqué designs, because after cutting it will not unravel like cotton does; thus, she can dispense with the need for the preliminary hemming of the pieces before applying them to the quilt top.

The cotton material was always washed before it was cut out for use in the quilts, but the velour is just hung out to air in the sun, or run through the dryer. This is to remove any lint or dust that may have accumulated on it. The entire quilt is also put in the dryer when it has been finished in order to remove any loose threads or batting fuzz.

Formerly Rushie also used a cotton "layer-built" batting for the stuffing of the quilts; even earlier, when she quilted while her mother was still directing her, she would use fresh gin cotton. This cotton would be carded and then laid down on the backing in small pieces, with care taken to make it lie evenly. Now, however, Rushie finds it more convenient to use the polyester batting. "That does make real good quilts, and another thing, soft, you know, and warm, and its easier quiltin' than cotton." It is also lighter in weight than the cotton, which is an important consideration in the production of the larger queen and king size quilts. "That's the thing about your big quilts, you have to pad them real thin, or they're so heavy you can't lift 'em, you know, to spread 'em on your bed." Sometimes with the velour quilts, if the primary use will not be as a cover, Rushie pads the inside with only some thin nylon lining (such as that used to line dresses or make slips). This thin lining will not add significantly to the weight of the quilt, although it does add a degree of warmth to it; in addition, the quilting will show up in relief, as it does in thicker linings, due to the preservation of the three-part fabric sandwich.

The growing demand for queen and king size quilts to cover large beds has caused Rushie to produce them in greater numbers. These beds are not prevalent in her area, but she has been able to overcome the problem of getting the necessary measurements: "There's not many through here, but there's a few through here who's got those big beds. There's one lady down the highway, people just bought theirs in the last year or two, and she's got a queen size and a king size. I just go down to her house and measure my quilts on 'em."

For the stuffing of the various pillows that she makes with "old-timey" piecework patterns, she blends scraps of wash and wear and velour fabric with foam rubber, mixed about half and half. "You can fluff 'em up like a feather piller, and it don't lose their shape, and makes it real nice."

[3]Rushie creates dolls as well as quilts; her favorite doll is a four-faced or two-faced doll, the pattern for which she originally received from her California cousin. The one she has been making for several years has been a doll with the four faces of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf, the grandmother, and Little Red Riding Hood with a very surprised expression on her face. Recent events in her state have prompted Rushie to prepare a pattern for a new doll: a two-faced doll featuring Wilbur Mills and Fanny the Stripper. She is modeling the faces after newspaper drawings and magazine clippings that she has traced and has had redrawn to size.

The frame that is used to "set in" the quilts is a "regular, old-timey" frame: long pieces of wood one inch by two inches that are clamped together at the corners and then laid on chair backs so as to facilitate the reach of the women as they quilt. The quilts are attached to the frames simply by tacking them down "with little bitty sprigs" (small nails). Rushie feels that this way is more convenient, and works more efficiently than the "old-timey way of whippin' 'em in with thread" to a cloth covering the frame.

The pieced and stuffed tops are quilted either by the piece (stitching along the inside outline of each patch: figure 1) or in a shell pattern (figure 2); the former type, usually done on quilts with smaller pieces or "more fancy" ones, takes the women longer, usually three or four days, whereas they are accustomed to completing the shell pattern of quilting in two days. The shell pattern is drawn on the pieced top by means of a white chalk attached to a string. One end of the string is placed on the border of the quilt to start, is drawn about it approximately 120 degrees, and then is shortened one inch or less to define concentrically the limits of the pattern. The size of each shell unit is gauged according to the dimensions and pattern of the pieced top.

Rushie's favorite quilts are the Double Wedding Ring and Grandmother's Flower Garden, but the reasons for her preferences are not totally aesthetically grounded: "I don't know, I guess I've just got in practice doing that, and uh, there's a bigger demand for it, and they're real pretty quilts. And you can use your small scraps."

A great deal of Rushie's life is taken up with quilting. We found her first with a double-sized appliqué velour top laid out and in process on a big table in the kitchen; quilts and fabrics are piled up in all corners of the house. An outbuilding that she and her husband own is completely filled with materials, and, as Luther says, "she's got more material than a dry goods store." She takes pride in what she does, and is not at all hesitant or apologetic about any of her productions, processes or attitudes. She is aware that she is able to produce items of value that will draw the appreciation and approval of others from all over the country; this awareness is pleasing to her and is made even more gratifying by the fact that quilting is something that is truly enjoyable for her.

Stella lives with her husband Les on a rural stretch of the same highway twenty-five miles southwest of Rushie. She was born in Oklahoma, but was raised in Allen, Texas, and they are preparing soon to move back to Texas again. They have moved around to a certain extent during

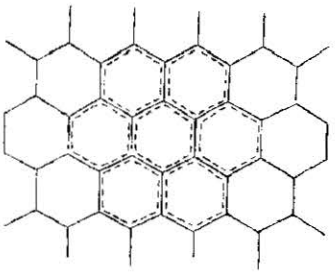

FIGURE 1. Quilting by the piece.

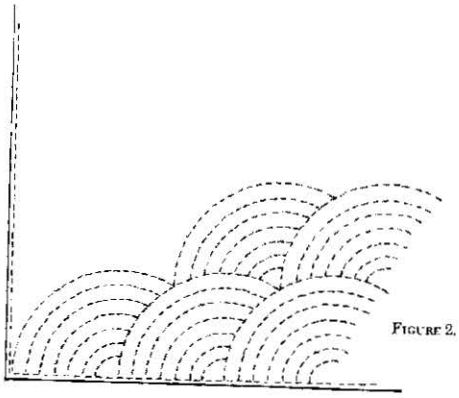

FIGURE 2. Shell pattern quilting.

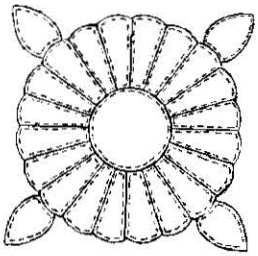

FIGURE 3. Stella's Dresden Plate.

their married life: at one time, they thought they would like to live in Wisconsin. Stella finished high school, but without any home economics or sewing classes, and went to a Normal school for eight weeks where she got her teaching certification. She taught for a year, and then married Les; later she worked as a store clerk.

Stella's mother had ten children, and we were told at first that she didn't do any quilting. Later, Stella revealed that her mother had made a few quilts by machine; this admission in the light of her earlier statement denying quilting done by her mother, disclosed her values concerning machine work: a quilt is not really a quilt unless it is worked by hand. Stella was helped in her efforts to learn quilting by an elderly aunt; her first one was pieced during a time of little money: she had "bad health" and used her quilt to pay her doctor bills. Five quilts were completed before her marriage.

In great contrast to Rushie whose emphasis now is on finding markets for and selling her quilts, Stella has made an extremely minimal attempt to sell them. We found her quite accidentally; the sharp eyes of my companion picked out the six-by-eight inch sign "quilts" in dark navy blue paint on dark brown background, affixed to a post perhaps two and a half feet high, with no clear direction even as to which house it was referring. She mentioned that several times she has had people coming up to the house asking for *quails*, indicating how truly illegible the sign is. She has gone to a couple of country fairs, but we were left with the impression that she really doesn't like selling in that way, and has not done it often. She claims to have given away hundreds of quilts, however.

When we first expressed our interest in the quilts, she brought out some large, newly-done quilts, asking prices in the range of fifty to seventy-five dollars. She stressed that all the material used in these quilts was new, no "scraps or used" fabric. It was only by accident that we noticed a high stack of older quilts in a back room. She permitted us to look at them, and we eventually bought a couple of these, but she apologized for their age, and when telling us how old they were her remarks were constantly contradicted by the obvious age of the fabric. This contradiction was evident even allowing for the possibility of the collection of the fabric scraps years before they were pieced and quilted. In addition, the prices that she asked for these older quilts were far below those of the newer ones, averaging twenty-five to forty dollars per quilt, despite the much finer quilting and the use of more

complex designs and color combinations. For Stella, it seemed, new is good, and old is something to be hidden in the back room.

The patterns that Stella uses most often for her piecework are the familiar ones that proliferate in older as well as more recent quilting books,[1] such as the Dresden Plate, the Lone or Broken Star, Grandmother's Flower Garden, Drunkard's Path and Robbing Peter to Pay Paul. She acquires most of her patterns from pattern books or magazines, and has some quilts that although presumably culled from the pages of these mass distribution pamphlets and print-outs, are generally not as frequently found as the often-recurring patterns noted above and traded between friends and neighbors. One such pattern is called States, and has the state flowers of the forty-eight states embroidered on blocks, and then bordered and quilted. She also has obtained patterns from copying them from quilts she has seen at fairs or at other people's homes. She told of one incident where she saw an interesting quilt hanging on a clothesline by the roadside north of her house; she made her husband stop the car, open the hood and pretend to tinker with the engine for as long as it took her to copy down the pattern. This was the Pickle Dish and Relish pattern ("you need a good imagination to figure out the relish"), which she described as essentially a variation of Grandmother's Flower Garden, with modified ends. This quilt was pieced in one-inch hexagons, and required one and a half to two years to complete (although Stella did work on others at the same time, as she usually does); she considers it her masterpiece because of the thousands of pieces of fabric successfully integrated into the whole.

Her piecework is not entirely unoriginal, however. After she has used one pattern many times, she will often change it to make it more interesting for her to work with. We saw one pattern where she had added four solid green leaf-shaped pieces equally spaced around the original design; although this pattern was uniquely hers, she still called it Dresden Plate, the basic foundation of the pattern. Despite the nomenclature, her new composition appeared to be stressing the flower-

[1]Including: Carrie A. Hall and Rose G. Kretsinger, *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1935); Audrey Heard and Beverly Pryor, *Complete Guide to Quilting* (Des Moines: Creative Home Library, 1974); Margaret Ickis, *The Standard Book of Quilt-Making and Collecting* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959); Ruby S. McKim, *One Hundred and One Patchwork Patterns* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962); Florence Peto, *American Quilts and Coverlets* (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1949); Carleton L. Safford and Robert Bishop, *America's Quilts and Coverlets* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1974).

like aspects of the shape with a resultant de-emphasis on the "plate" image. (figure 3).

Stella often cuts out the pieces for her patterns during the winter, threading them on a string like Rushie does, sewing them together all year long. She is concerned with planning which materials complement each other, and she has a good eye for blending the colors to fit the overall design.

All of the older quilts that we looked at were made entirely from cotton, and stuffed with backed cotton batting. She had acquired the cotton for the piecework from a nearby dress factory; she and her sister would buy a large amount of scraps from the factory and then divide them for their quilts. The newer quilts are made entirely of the new polyester fabric, and stuffed also with polyester. She does not use any of the heavier wash and wear, doubleknit, or nylon velour in her quilts that are so popular with Rushie.

Stella quilts the pieced and stuffed tops alone in the back bedroom of their home; she does not know of any other women in the area who quilt, nor would she be disposed to ask anyone to help her, for "you can never tell how good their hand is." She uses a wooden quilting frame bought from Sears which folds away; she remembers using "old-time" frames that were let down from the ceiling to quilt on, but doesn't have the room, nor the high ceilings, for one of those.

The older quilts are primarily quilted by the piece, with diamond hatching covering the border areas, but the newer ones are mainly quilted only with the diamond hatching, and are spaced more widely than the earlier ones. She uses a ruler to mark these straight lines, despite her belief that somehow this is cheating; she employs a needle to scratch the surface of the top to mark the quilting lines. By this method she can only mark one line at a time, and must quilt it before the fluff disappears. She has never used chalk or any other marking device on her quilts. She uses a straight running stitch to quilt.

Unlike Rushie who is highly convinced of the value of her quilts, Stella seems to feel that the quilting, although it is nice to do and she enjoys it tremendously, has little real worth. Several times she stated that she didn't have any talent, she wished she could do something (this was said once after commenting that her husband always beats her when they play canasta: she wished she had something that she was good at). She bases her belief that she isn't artistic on the fact that she can't draw a straight line; she doesn't consider her ruler as a tool to be used in helping her achieve her goals; rather, she considers it cheating. She therefore does not consider her quilts to be an art, but nevertheless is not at all embarrassed or reticent to have pictures taken of them or to answer questions about them.

The attitudes toward their work, processes involved, selling efforts, materials and tools used by Stella and Rushie present greater differences than they do similarities, and therefore do not facilitate the formation of facile generalizations about "quilters in Southwest Arkansas." This is all for the better, for it necessitates analysis of the work of these two women on their own unique, individual basis.

Quilting and piecework are considered to be traditional American folk arts, but most of the literature concerning them seems to concentrate on the element of conformity of patterns over time, and on a romanticized image of the quilting bee. There is usually no effort taken in trying to delineate or explain some of the quilts that show traits of individuality or originality in pattern, or to account for the differences in processes used by different quilters; we are thereby often led to a view of quilting as a rather homogeneous activity and mode of production.

This investigation into the quilting patterns and processes of Stella and Rushie denies these kinds of assumptions and presuppositions. Due to their close geographical proximity, it would be easy to assume great similarities between their work. But this is not the case generally, although similarities do, of course, exist. It would seem to be a more accurate characterization to approach analysis of this research with a foundation based upon the uniqueness of the work, parallelling the individual manner in which the two women approach it. This foundation accounts for the widespread diversities found in the quilts and in how they are worked; differing and distinctive combinations of motivations, inspirations, influences, feelings and necessities may more directly pinpoint explanations for specific differences. Each quilt is not produced in a vacuum, however; the distinctiveness often blends with certain qualities that might be conceived of as "traditional," revealing the synthesis of factors of conventionality and originality that goes into each creation. As there is a multiplicity of factors that governs the differences involved in quiltmaking, so too are there various elements contributing to the appearance of similarities and familiar patterns or processes. These similarities, although theoretically attributable to chance or coincidence, more likely are due to the similar ways in which stimuli are received, perceived and responded to in similar situations; to interaction with and influence by other people; to influence by mass media; and to the way in which previous solutions to similar problems are re-

membered and reapplied. It is the blending of these factors which researchers must take into account when trying to analyze quilts or any other kind of "material folk culture."

Yet another problem still remains: the tendency of the researcher to impose his conceptions of what is and what is not a "traditional" element, and to posit statements concerning creativity and conventionality in the light of these standards. I believe that it is more important to determine how the subject feels about the use of familiar patterns and processes, and how she uses them, as the basis for investigation. Rushie's conceptions of "old-timey" elements may not coincide with notions that I might have held about "traditions," but my notions may be totally inapplicable when faced with the reality of Rushie's creations, under the circumstances of their creation. It is better not to try to impose standards and values drawn from a different background and different experiences on the creator and creation; considering the creator's own conceptions about the different elements involved will more likely lead to a more accurate characterization of the phenomena.

Taking into consideration the attitudes of the creator towards his or her products and towards the differing elements comprising them, and basing the subsequent analysis on the uniqueness of human behavior have profound implications. In terms of research, the kinds of questions asked are changed, as are the interpretations of the data obtained. Emphasis is drawn away from theories of cultural determinism for behavior and towards the creator and the realities and dynamism of the creation process. This analysis is therefore able to deal with change, without predicting the demise of the activity and denigrating contemporary developments as a necessary diminishment of quality. Change is endemic to the individual, and may be brought about by any element at any time, in an often unpredictable manner (unpredictable, at least, in the eyes of the investigator). Therefore, analyses assuming homogeneity of cultural background by means of an organic model, elevating the object to the level of supreme importance, or taking for granted the lack of individuality of the creator (often found in analyses such as functionalism, diffusionism, and structuralism) cannot be acceptable explanations for human behavior. In fact, the only continuity that one may propose is the act of quiltmaking itself. It is the versatility and variation found in the creation process and results that provide much of the excitement associated with these objects, both for the creator and for the investigator; thus, it is this dynanism which must be stressed in any analysis.

An examination of the synthesis of the similarities and differences found in each act of creation and in each resulting quilt may provide us with important clues for understanding these kinds of phenomena wherever they occur. It may also lead to a reduction of the artificial distinctions often made between "fine artists" and "folk artists" when it is realized that the kinds of problems and decisions involved in the act of creation are the same. Rushie and Stella both make quilts and they often employ similar patterns and materials. Nevertheless, each quilt is a unique creation and a result of individual responses to the practical and aesthetic problems involved in the creation. One cannot place too strong an emphasis upon the importance of the individual in the creation process; for without the creator, how could one begin?

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